

Gardening E-literature (or, how to effectively plant the seeds for future investigations on electronic literature)

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electropoetics



In the course of her wide ranging review of Scott Rettberg's **Electronic Literature**, Anna Nacher offers a glimpse into "semi-peripheral avant-gardes" that are more open than other fields of digital culture to decolonization and not restricted to the Anglophone world.

A book bearing the simple and supposedly self-explaining title of *Electronic Literature*, devoid of any further explanation, exclamation or justification, could have been read as an act of boldness or even bravado, considering the scope (and at times temperature) of discussion surrounding both the very category and the boundaries of the field it strives to cover. In choosing this title, Rettberg nods to N. Katherine Hayles' book accompanying *Electronic Literature Collection vol. 1*. Like Rettberg, Hayles was also seeking to encompass the breadth of creative work included in that initial, field defining collection ELC vol. 1 under the umbrella term of "the literary", so her endeavor came to be subtitled *Electronic*

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N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature. New Horizons for the Literary*, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame 2008.

Literature. New Horizons for the Literary. The 464 page (and by now seminal) volume edited by Joseph Tabbi, which had appeared on Bloomsbury a couple of months prior to Rettberg's is similarly making a sort of an excuse or explanation

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J. Tabbi (ed.), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Electronic Literature*, Bloomsbury Academic, London and New York 2018.

in its title. Firmly and properly having claimed the role of a handbook (*The Bloomsbury Handbook of Electronic Literature*), in some measure, it conforms to predictable expectations of the academic audience and, at the same time, sets anticipated and familiar reception horizon. The valuable online resource in French, *Les basiques: la littérature*

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P. Bootz, *Les Basiques: la littérature numérique*, 2007
<https://www.olats.org/livresetudes/basiques/basiques.php>

numérique by Philippe Bootz is also worth mentioning in this context. Published as the part of OLATS, l'Observatoire Leonardo des Arts et des Techno-Sciences, the initiative of the Leonardo/ISAST's sister organization managed by

Annick Bureau, it certainly serves as the first point of reference for French-speaking audience interested in getting more acquainted with the field. The whole Les Basiques

series is designed as an introduction to the growing in prominence domain of art and technoscience of which Leonardo is a longstanding champion, but the author nevertheless prominently succeeded in synthetic presentation of the electronic literature's defining features, making it a valuable resource to anyone who seeks some clarity on the rapidly developing area of creative practice. For the sake of brevity here, I am leaving aside the discussion on significant nuances stemming from comparison of the terms of electronic literature and littérature numérique, which are not quite equivalent to each other.

As research on electronic literature keeps flourishing, another edited volume has been announced as being in production on Bloomsbury Press, positing electronic literature as

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D. Grigar, J. O'Sullivan, *E-Literature as Digital Humanities: Contexts, Forms & Practices*, forthcoming.

part of a significant shift in the humanities. Just a glance at the authors' names and subjects discussed is enough to convince the potential readers that the book is going to decisively establish electronic literature as a major section of

digital scholarship. It will follow recent prominent publication edited by Tabbi and the team consisting of two volumes of articles previously published in the Electronic Book

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J. Tabbi et al. (ed.), *Post-Digital. Dialogues and Debates From Electronic Book Review*, Bloomsbury Academic, London and New York 2020.

Review. Thus the wealth of highest quality reflection on electronic literature abounds - enough to plunge us into despair in the face of the time needed to digest all the newly available resources, let alone to make creative scholarly use

of it.

The elegant and possibly productive way to proceed with a review of Scott Rettberg's

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S. Rettberg, *Electronic Literature*, Polity Press, London 2019.

Electronic Literature would be then to follow the dialog: compare the approaches, perspectives, and propositions – and maybe throw a grain of salt into the mix via Roberto

Simanowski's decision to prefer digital over electronic literature. I became, however,

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R. Simanowski, *Digital Art and Meaning. Reading Kinetic Poetry, Text Machines, Mapping Art, and Interactive Installations*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2011.

attracted to an entirely different method, responding to the almost irresistible craving for new research endeavors triggered by Rettberg's book soon after I had set to reading. Almost instantaneously, I was prompted to start a separate notebook with emerging ideas and keep this research diary

handy. A common pitfall awaiting (over)enthusiastic academics - so insightfully captured by this meme circulating in May 2020:



In what follows here then, I aim to demonstrate a readerly and textual process: at first glance, the book seems a humble attempt at synthesizing a burgeoning and increasingly hybrid field of creativity and scholarship; in fact, it doubly works as fertilizer and a nursery for a flourishing permacultural garden of manifold, robust research that focuses on creative practices tapping into electronic literary resources.

An attempt, let's be frank, that otherwise could have faced significant risks. Meager chances are any author somewhat recklessly and daringly shouting in the air, "THIS is Electronic Literature and deal with it", would have weather numerous battles following such a gesture. Mostly discursive, but you just never know upon encountering the multilingual room where almighty giants of Electronic Literature and Littérature Numérique in one corner and First, Second and Third Generation e-lit in the other are bound to wrestle. One might have gotten annihilated without even noticing. Nothing personal, mind you. Just a (playful) collateral damage.

No wonder then that *Electronic Literature*, a volume of 250-odd pages, bears the name that needs no further introduction to anyone who has paid even the scarcest attention to how electronic literature emerged and developed over the last decades as the domain of blooming creativity, scholarly reflection, and innovative pedagogy. One of the stalwart contributors to the field, both as an artist and a researcher, not to mention his role of organizational tour de force behind Electronic Literature Organization and ELMCIP Knowledge Base, a professor and co-leader of the Digital Culture program at the University of Bergen, Scott Rettberg, very much epitomizes the subject he is striving to describe. Let me start with the obvious: *Electronic Literature* succeeds in reaching the goal that may have otherwise seemed almost impossible to achieve. Rettberg skillfully meanders between two supposedly contradictory poles. One would be crystal clear: the need to provide a well-informed, concise, and focused introduction for a general audience is well worth acknowledging. By no means a trivial or an easy task, for being able to synthesize such a broad range of creative practices along with a rapid succession of technologies and platforms, accompanied with the ever-growing body of scholarship and debate on the fundamental theoretical issues, combined with various angles of interpretations and ways of reading – all of this requires a great deal of knowledge, talent, and skill. A path leads through many a pitfall waiting on the sides, including the ways to envision and project such a broad audience. One can easily imagine quite disparate circles of newcomers to the field: those interested in digital culture at large and those who want to catch a sight of recent literary developments (again, oscillating between two poles quite wide apart, the experimental or avant-garde and the popular). And then – since besides already mentioned volumes by Hayles and Tabbi no similar endeavor had existed at the time when the book was published - there is still the need to maintain and advance scholarly discussion surrounding the robust field of literary practices in the digital domain. Scott Rettberg manages to follow this latter path through offering precise categorizations, yet not for the sake of producing Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge, but rather to test the operative model that would help to understand better a phenomenon that has been undergoing dynamic changes ever since Christopher Strachey got to play with the literary conventions of a love letter and the first programmable machines (in this case the first commercial computer, Ferranti Mark I) when in 1952 he designed an algorithm to automatically generate random love letters out of the words evocative of romantic affection.

The process could be likened to a chain reaction or fermentation – depending on the point of view taken (hinting at the recent trend spotted mostly on Facebook, but also in the context of conference events - to shift the practices of electronic literature to uncharted

territories of culinary extravaganza and gastropoetics, including home brewing, limerick

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Those who had planned attending 2019 ELO Conference in Cork, had a chance to participate in the first event of this kind, The Limerick Diet gastropoetic experience by chefs Scott Rettberg and Talan Memmott, described in the abstract as follows: "The Limerick Diet is a digital performance piece that mirrors the popular competitive cooking show format. The piece will be driven by a slot-style poetry engine with an adaptive grammar to generate culinary recombinations. The vocabulary of the engine will be based on locally sourced sustainable ingredients in order to generate meals that while aleatory and inventive are nevertheless more Irish than the poetry of William Butler Yeats, the prose of James Joyce, or the drama of Samuel Beckett by virtue of the fact that they are limericks that spring from the peaty sod of the Irish soil and taste of the salts of the wild Irish sea. The meats served will be more Celtic and more tender than the meat of any ancient body found leathering in a bog." Some elements of the show can be traced back to the 2016 netprov Monstrous Weather, on which occasion Memmott prepared a monstrous menu generator. Eventually seven randomly chosen guests had been invited for a diner in Cork that was broadcast live on Facebook on July 15th, 2019. More on the event:

<https://www.facebook.com/limerickdiet/>

For 2020 ELO Virtual Conference The Quarantine Quatrains has been announced, where the chefs would offer the generated poetry menus in quatrains to be prepared as DIY meals by the participants. Therefore, the event would unfold on "a rolling basis throughout the Conference Banquet day, so that diners in Europe, the United States, Australia, etc. will be able to eat the dinner at an appropriate time for their own schedule".

diet or quarantine quatrains). Considering the sheer number of conferences, workshops, research projects, critical and analytical works (of which the first chapter of Electronic Literature gives an extensive and decisive overview) and the scope of creative (multilingual) projects placed under the flag of electronic literature, the fervor accompanying debates on definitions and categorizations does not come as a surprise. In fact, stakes at play far exceed the obvious attempt to build a functioning and relevant taxonomy. The waves of consecutive novelty forms and technologies, often uneasily situated at the crossroads of literary practices, popular entertainment, confessional genres, and lifestyle coaching seem to have thrown even those acquainted with the field onto a stormy seashore, where one needs to watch the rules, the timing, and the actors involved - in order not to be washed over to illusory safety of technological determinism on the one hand, or naïve textualism on the other. The fact that Scott Rettberg prominently succeeds in his double mission of setting the ground and furthering the debate invites possible further investigations – in the process not unlike planting the seeds for future research on e-literature.

Planting seeds, like all foundational acts initiating growth and development, is still a first step in a very long process, which – as any gardener knows all too well – is prone to numerous irregularities (including increasingly unstable and unpredictable weather events, possible pests waiting for any occasion to feast on a fresh produce, seasonal invasions of slugs, common diseases, small rodents always happy to dig holes and chew on plants' roots to name a few common

troubles). Luckily, there are also ways to counteract other than allowing for some degree of destruction of unwelcome lifeforms. One of the most effective ways to ensure resilience and strive for balance is offered by permaculture, which in a nutshell can be described as a way to design a resilient garden (or a farm) based on natural patterns already present in the ecosystems (including no-dig gardening pioneered by Masanobu Fukuoka as early as in 1930s, where earth is treated as a trove of microorganisms ready not only to provide necessary soil nutrients, but also to prevent from diseases and problematic micro- and macroorganisms). This is why the name – coined in the 1970s by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren – was at the time the abbreviation of "permanent agriculture" which soon came

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D. Holmgren, B. Mollison, *Permaculture One*. Transworld Publishers 1978. In fact, this early definition reads: "Permaculture is a word we have coined for an integrated, evolving system of perennial or self-perpetuating plant and animal

to also mean "permanent culture". Permacultural design means the radical change of a perspective: a garden becomes an ecosystem rather than yet another production machine operating according to the principles of agrilogistics.

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Organisms become unexpected

species useful to man." (p. 1). The definition has massively evolved over the last 5 decades incorporating also ethical agendas, anti-consumerism and anti-colonialism, and the permaculture movement spread from seemingly peripheral Tasmania, where Mollison's Tagari farm is located, and reached a truly global prominence, with many regional variations tapping into local resources and facing small- and large-scale challenges. Mollison himself slightly modified the way permaculture was defined in his *Permaculture. Two*: "I regard permanent agriculture as a valid, safe, and sustainable, complete energy system." (B. Mollison, *Permaculture Two. Practical Design for Town and Country in Permanent Agriculture*, Tagari Publishing 1979.

Agrilogistics is the term coined by Timothy Morton in his *Dark Ecology*: "The term names a specific logistics of agriculture that arose in the Fertile Crescent and that is still plowing ahead. Logistics, because it is a technical, planned, and perfectly logical approach to built space. Logistics, because it proceeds without stepping back and rethinking the logic. A viral logistics, eventually requiring steam engines and industry to feed its proliferation. Agrilogistics: an agricultural program so successful that it now dominates agricultural technics planetwide." (T. Morton, *Dark Ecology. For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, Columbia University Press, New York 2016, p. 42.

allies rather than weeds, pests and enemies; the richer an ecosystem becomes, the more resilient it gets. Scott Rettberg's gardening of e-literary research is then decidedly open and welcoming towards all lifeforms rather than based on policing, laborious pruning, much less eliminating organisms considered rogue, invasive, or unwanted. He sets to task of

ensuring that the e-literature as a field of research is a hospitable ecosystem capable of sustainable and sound development.

Identifying ecosystem and setting the gardening beds...

Part of the comfort as a reader of *Electronic Literature* comes from the very well-defined objectives, assuring tone, and convincing approach expressed in the opening paragraphs: the book "provides a genre-driven approach to the corpus of electronic literature, albeit one that calls for a reconsideration of what qualities distinguish a creative genre in contemporary networked culture, as this may differ from traditional notions of genre in

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S. Rettberg, *Electronic...*, p. 3.

literature, art, and media studies." Such perspective is well suited, as it taps into a steady thread in the cultural theory of

any media-based form of expression, either from the perspective of their modality as textual, visual or multimodal, or as space-based and time-based logic of operation. At the same time, such an approach fruitfully sets the ground for historical and structural analysis. Therefore, the consecutive chapters are dedicated to Combinatory Poetics, Hypertext Fiction, Interactive Fiction and Gamelike Forms, Kinetic and Interactive Poetry, Network Writing, and Divergent Streams – the latter encompass genres such as locative narratives, interactive installations, combinatory cinema, and XR forms. The decision to approach the concept of genre as "situational framings" and "situated actions" is both adequate and productive. Especially, when it accounts for hybridity and – following N. Katherine Hayles' famous notion of "hopeful monsters" – a monstrosity of e-literary works often grounded in and informed by aesthetic or technical incoherencies, which is not to be easily glided over. It is not without some questions, though, I will attend later.

One of the strongest features of *Electronic Literature* is Rettberg's tendency to consistently maintain the internal, dynamic multidimensionality while expertly maneuvering between axes of development set as diachronic (more genealogy than a linear history) and synchronic (the structure of the field situated at the crossroads of communicative and expressive efforts with the use of platforms and programming languages). Each chapter accurately sustains the breadth of scope (where, however, no

essential milestone of e-literature is forgotten, providing a synthetic yet thorough outline), whereas the depth of historical context is continuously mobilized to shed more light on specific contemporary developments.

Sometimes vistas opened by historical accounts encourage further exploration, which seems a humble strategy on the surface, but in fact discloses how potent Rettberg's approach is in advancing the future imagined discussion on e-literature's genealogies and trajectories. Finding antecedents to network writing in Mass-Observation Movement could lead to further exploration of the possible relations between the concepts of living

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Famously outlined by Stuart Hall as "present, on-going, continuing, unfinished, open-ended", juxtaposed against meanings attached to tradition being understood as "the prison-house of the past" and contradicting "the fantasy of its completeness" (S. Hall, "Constituting the Archive", *Third Text*, vol. 15 no. 54, Spring 2001, p. 89).

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Paula Amad fruitfully employs the notion of counter-archive to emphasize how the medium of film transformed the very concept of the archive, undermining its positivist historicism, and pointing out that "Film's mechanical-based nature as an automatic, arbitrary, and anonymous record of contingent information on everyday life meant that, in addition to having potential to be an exhaustive, visual storehouse, it also displayed tendency, as Kracauer understood, for a level of "endlessness" and "indeterminacy" that unsettled the finite need of historicist evidence." The points made resonate with the discussion on digital archiving. (P. Amad, *Counter-Archive: Film, the Everyday*, Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planete, Columbia University Press 2010, p. 21)

archives , counter-archives , affective archives and electronic

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Por. G. Palladini (ed.), *Lexicon for an Affective Archive*, Intellect Ltd., London 2017.

literature, where so much energy is dedicated to issues of preservation and archiving.

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The subject has been extensively discussed during many a conference, be it yearly ELO conferences or the special panels at MLA annual convention thanks to Dene Grigar's WSU-Vancouver Electronic Literature Lab's pioneering efforts, widely documented by now in the series of Live Stream Traversals available online <http://dtc.wsuv.org/wp/ell/2018/10/12/2018-19-live-stream-traversal-schedule/> and in several publications, some of which include D. Grigar, S. Moulthrop, *Traversals: The Use of Preservation for Early Electronic Writing*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2017; N. Schiller and D. Grigar. "Born Digital Preservation: A Live Internet Traversal of Sarah Smith's King of Space." *International Journal of Digital Humanities*, vol. 1 no. 47, 2019; D. Grigar, "Archiving Electronic Literature: Selection Criteria, Methodology, and Challenges." *Journal of Archival Organization* 2019.

Seeking genealogy of kinetic poetry in experimental and avant-garde cinema of different periods (in Duchamp and Len Lye among others) is a novelty compared to the

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L. P. Glazier, *Digital Poetics. The Making of E-Poetries*, The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa 2002. The film as a medium is a quite significant point of reference, but not the particular instances of avant-garde cinema.

fundamental book by Glazier and to some extent follows the path opened by Christopher Funkhauser who traces the

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C.T. Funkhauser, *Prehistoric Digital Poetry. An Archaeology of Forms, 1959-1995*, The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa 2007.

relationship of poetry and film/video reaching out to structural film (referring to Hollis Frampton among others)

and early video art of John Baldessari, Vito Acconci, Tony Oursler, Joan Jonas and – this name could not have been omitted – Nam June Paik.

...planting the seeds

However, the proposition provokes the whole set of still under-explored questions of how electronic literature is situated at the crossroads of literary experiments, avant-garde cinema, audiovisual culture, sound art, and new media art, with more attention paid to the concept of intermedia, and here I am going to share my research notes to a more significant extent. The possible affinities are getting even more evident when combinatory cinema projects are being located in the context of Gene Youngblood's *Expanded Cinema* or Chris Marker's *Immunity*. Here Rettberg's unquestionable double expertise stems also from creative projects co-authored with Roderick Coover or Nick Monfort. Following this line of thought might, in turn, end up in shifting attention from the often and somewhat compulsory (and overused) notion of Gesamtkunstwerk towards the project famously expressed by Friedrich Schlegel in his *Philosophical Fragments*: "Romantic poetry is a progressive, universal poetry. Its aim isn't merely to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature, and make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical, poeticize wit and fill and saturate the forms of art with every kind of good, solid matter for

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F. Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. P. Firchow, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1991, p. 31. One might find significant in its own right that Schlegel is known as a proponent of fragmentation as the mode of presenting the ideas and very much as a way of thinking, a philosophical precedent of sorts to what Dene Grigar called a "rhapsodic textuality" (D. Grigar, *Rhapsodic Textualities*, in: ed. D. Cortes-Maduro, *Digital Media and Textuality. From Creation to Archiving*, Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld 2017).

instruction, and animate them with the pulsation of humor." And he continues: "The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming". Needless to say, a program of a similar kind

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Ibidem.

reverberates through all major currents of the early XX-century avant-garde movements, which constitute such a prominent point of reference in *Electronic Literature*. Reframing this Romantic vision – but slightly re-routing it via the concept of intermedia (and postmedia, which would probably better suit accounting for the logics of platforms) – so that it is expressed in terms of XXI-century

posthumanism better addressing non-human agencies interwoven in the process of technogenesis, might be a theoretical endeavor worth pursuing on the grounds of electronic literature.

Alternatively, the intermedial aesthetics of the avant-garde movements is worth of interrogation in the perspective from beyond the cultural hegemony of established cultural centers. It is worth noting then that the same year of 1926 brought not only the famous *Anemic Cinema* by Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray (listed by Rettberg) but also the fascinating intermedia project of Czech constructivist poet, artist and architectural theorist Karel Teige, one of the founders and chief theoreticians of the avant-garde group Devětsil (1920-1930), with which the famous linguist, Roman Jakobson was associated at some point. The collective introduced the idea of poetism, "a lifestyle, an attitude, and a form of behavior", which would represent "the avant-garde notion of the unity of art and life in an ideal society, where work would resemble artistic activity in being free and

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E. Levinger, *Czech Avant-Garde Art: Poetry for Five Senses*, Art Bulletin, vol. LXXXI no. 3 1999, p. 513.

gamelike." Schlegel's vision of "progressive, universal poetry" clearly resonates throughout the whole poetist manifesto.

For Vitězslav Nezval, whose poems were rendered with the use of particular choreography, it meant first and foremost the act of giving up the traditional poetic and literary genres and setting up for "poetry of five senses" which signified "poems woven with movement, light, and image – poetistic poetry without words." Devětsil became

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K. Teige, "Poesie pro pět smyslů", *Pásmo* vol. 2 no.2, Brno: Devětsil, Nov 1925, pp 23-24;

known primarily for its concept of "picture poems" ,

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For full text of Teige's Poetism Manifesto, see T.O. Benson, E. Forgács, *Between Worlds. A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes 1910-1930*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2002. Czech version available online: K. Teige, "Poetismus", *Host III*, červenec (June) 1924 <https://www.ceskaliteratura.cz/dok/mpoet.htm>

exemplified by Teige's *Pozdrav z cesty* (Greetings from the road), *Stavba a báseň* (Construction site and poem) or Jindřich Štyrský *Souvenir* among others and later developed into typographic

poems resembling other European experiments with visual concrete poetry. For *Abeceda / Alphabet* – based on Nezval's short poems - each letter of the alphabet was choreographed by a dancer, Milča Mayerová, into a photo-ballet.

Electronic literature generally seems to be relatively more open than other fields of digital culture to decolonization and more receptive to the currents from the outside of the Anglophone world, as documented by the essays on digital and concrete poetry in Portuguese or Spanish, the significant contributions (both theoretical and artistic) of Francophonie and Spanish-speaking communities, the noticeable e-literature initiatives, projects and artworks in Arabic and in some African countries, burgeoning Central and Eastern European contribution (as documented both in ELC and ELMCIP Knowledge Base, for instance), and with the recent Electronic Literature Collection's vol. 4 effort to reach out to Chinese-speaking practitioners. All of this means that soon we might need to undertake a significant attempt to re-weave e-literature's histories and genealogies, especially those pertaining to well-trodden paths of the avant-garde as framed within still

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Following dramatic events in Minneapolis and nationwide in the U.S. in direct response to George Floyd's death at the hand of a police officer, the long history of racially-motivated misconduct of American law enforcement and systemic racism in the U.S. (and in other countries with colonial pasts), a huge wave of insurgent anti-colonial and anti-racist protests is rising globally at the time of writing in May – June 2020. It seems the discussion has barely started, even if the current wave seems yet another iteration of prior riots and continuation of a longtime fight for racial justice and equality.

dominant geographical and cultural perspectives. Semi-peripheral avant-gardes (even if often extremely interesting due to their hybrid qualities, where the universalist and universalizing assumptions get infused with local ingredients) rarely make it to the official art histories – and when they do, too often they get relegated to the cabinets of exotic curiosities.

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An interesting example of the out-of-center phenomenon that significantly contributed to re-writing the history of media art is the then-Yugoslavian New Tendencies series of exhibitions and BIT International journal. Re-discovered by a Croatian curator Darko Fritz (also literally, when Fritz stumbled upon the trove of forgotten copies of Bit International Magazine), soon became the important point of reference for any accurate account of the history of computer / digital art (see a mammoth catalog of the exhibition held in 2008 at ZKM in Karlsruhe, M. Rosen (ed.), *A Little Known Story about a Movement, a Magazine, and the Computer's Arrival in Art: New Tendencies and Bit International 1961-1973*, MIT Press,

However, such a re-weaving does not necessarily need to be seen as a primarily corrective measure reclaiming a unified, 'proper' version of history. What is at stake (and seems much more interesting) is rather the ability to maintain a certain level of productive flexibility in shifting between perspectives, when it comes to

Cambridge 2011). Notabene: Nova Tendencijs 3 in 1965 presented Waldemar Cordeiro's *Semantic Concrete Art*, among other intermedia works (like Dieter Roth's *Crash*) that might be interesting from the genealogic perspective of electronic literature.

interpretations and critique of inherently inter- or transmedia forms. In some cases – as Rettberg demonstrates in the exemplary and often referenced

case of Utterback and Achituv's media installation *Text Rain* – even the otherwise

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Simanowski proposes the category of digital rather than electronic literature, which is a no non-sense choice within the logic of Simanowski's justification to opt for the category that also encompasses the performance of the sign on the monitor.

insightful and clarifying perspective by Roberto Simanowski, might not be quite convincing. The proposition that the literary is grounded in the text's importance as a linguistic phenomenon juxtaposed to a visual object of interaction sounds fair enough insofar as the primary interest is

traditionally analytical. Otherwise, the proposition does not really allow for tracing already mentioned "hopeful monsters (...) composed of parts taken from diverse

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N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic...* p. 4.

traditions that may not always **fit neatly** together."

[emphasis mine]. Decentering avant-gardes through the lens

of semi-peripheral intermediality (which always is also media-conscious) may provide an interesting and adequate tool kit for this not-fitting-neatly, which apparently is often situated at the very heart of electronic literature.

At the same time, Rettberg accomplishes and consistently retains the clear-cut precision of his argument, which is the subject of constant awe. The sense of no-frills, non-seductive yet not without a sense of humor either, to the point and almost Zen-like style of writing contributes immensely to building a trustful and honest relationship with a reader, the success of which is grounded in the highly relevant and unquestionable practice- and research-based expertise of the author. One can also sense that a significant part of this expertise is based on creative pedagogy offered at the Digital Culture program and often coalescing around ELMCIP Knowledge Base.

...befriending unexpected allies, caring for seedlings and waiting for cross-pollination

However, one aspect of Rettberg's endeavor (monstrous itself) draws attention in light of third-gen e-lit's recent discursive prominence and postweb conditions of digital creativity.

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As outlined by Nick Monfort proposing other than generation-based version of historical developments, N. Monfort, A Web Reply to the Post-Web Generation, <https://nickm.com/post/2018/08/a-web-reply-to-the-post-web-generation/>

Both the generally ergodic nature of electronic literature (the statement that by now became a cliché) and the already mentioned vigorous debate surrounding Third Generation e-lit with its ambiguous shift towards the popular invite a more decisive incorporation of an audience's discursive

practices, significant of genre seen as a discursive formation based on the constant play informed by power intensities inscribed into a cultural moment and inspired by them.

Granted, clearly visible Rettberg's inspirations by the platform studies to some extent allow for acknowledging the role of the audience, as does the reader-response theory – the usual suspect when it comes to finding the proponents of audience-based approaches in aesthetic and literary theory. Also, it was Scott Rettberg who brilliantly pointed out a decade ago that if electronic literature is to thrive and develop (speaking in terms of its infrastructure and practicalities), it should communize rather than monetize. Speaking

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S. Rettberg, *Communitizing Electronic Literature*, *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, vol. 3., no.2, 2009.

from the perspective of 10 years after, to a great extent, we can see how (in a non-trivial effort) communities of practice have been coalescing around the works and practices, including creation, distribution, archiving, preservation and critique of electronic literature. This is how "relocating the literary", as Joseph Tabbi has remarked in the title of his insightful essay, has been happening – "in networks, knowledge bases, global systems, material, and mental environments", to borrow the whole phrase.

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J. Tabbi, *Relocating the Literary: In Networks, Knowledge Bases, Global Systems, Material, and Mental Environments* in: ed. J. Tabbi, *Bloomsbury Handbook...* p. 399.

Still, it seems that at least one aspect of this shift may not quite fit into the trajectory envisioned in the not so distant past – namely, the full embrace of the web vernacular, which

seems perfectly fit to fill the position of an unexpected ally in striving for a rich, diverse and resilient ecosystem. This however, might require taking a step back and giving up a bit on expectations as to how e-literature should develop or even what counts as such. Based on the impressions from some heated debates around instapoetry, for instance, incorporation of the popular practices into the field that had been so far outlined in close proximity to the strategies of experimental literature does not occur without some resistance. Guilty as charged, caution is understandable, considering what has recently happened both to the web (now the internet of platforms) and the culture of reasonable and well-informed deliberation (yet another victim of rapid extinction). Having said that, failed fantasies and missed expectations aside too, the fact is that the significant part of what can be called electronic literature today, is happening outside the respected system of academic taxonomies and tastes shaped by the high modernist imperative of the avant-garde experimentation, and focused on "renovating modernist aesthetic practices,

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J. Pressman, *Digital Modernism. Making it New in New Media*, Oxford University Press, London 2014, p. 2.

principles, and texts". I'm writing this hesitatingly, being fully aware that the distinction I'm referring to is neither neutral nor unproblematic and with the heart and mind generally slanted towards the experimental – except for

occasional spikes of joyful pleasures when I'm seeing a GIF or meme so accurately and with such a shrewd wit commenting on the news of the day. Nevertheless, let's face the facts: one of the most efficient ways to introduce the very notion of electronic literature to our students proved to be via memes, Twitter bots, and instapoetry rather than through the Electronic Literature Collection. It is not to say that the latter is not inspiring the sincere moments of awe in less experienced audiences – far from it, I have seen many happy discoveries followed by brilliant conversations with my students while having them confront with ELC. Nonetheless, the vernacular of the web (or, rather, the postweb) immerses them altogether in a different set of engagements, which might have something

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L. Flores, *Third Generation Electronic Literature*, *Electronic Book Review*, April 7, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.7273/axyj-3574>.

to do with "generational cultural moments" (I would prefer to replace this phrase with "sensibilities informed by cultural moment").

No wonder then that one of the most dynamic discussions of the recent years surrounds the vernacular aesthetics and communication strategies of 'third-gen e-lit'. For as compared to N. Katherine Hayles' 2008 account, electronic literature has expanded again, yet in a somewhat unpredictable direction, given how much energy of the hitherto

research was dedicated to the experimental and the avant-garde. With some exceptions , the debate was framed along the generational axes outlined by N. Katherine Hayles and followed by others. It has proved quite vigorous, at least judging from the temperature of discussion during a few conference panels. That is how usually the generation-based framing of the most recent historical processes work, both for specialized critique and public opinion. Millennials and their avocado sandwiches. OK, boomer. Been there, seen this – from Gen-X with (lukewarm) regards. The dialogue in the e-lit circles, far from hostility underlining the recent outburst of typical generational conflict, not only brought to the surface the wave of research interest in the popular forms of "a writing-centered art that engages the

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Most notably by Nick Monfort, see N. Monfort, A Web Reply to the Post-Web Generation, <https://nickm.com/post/2018/08/a-web-reply-to-the-post-web-generation/> accessed: May 8, 2020.

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L. L. Flores, Third Generation Electronic Literature, *Electronic Book Review*, April 7, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.7273/axvj-3574>. One of the early accounts of "third gen e-lit" was Kathi Inman Berens's 2018 ELO Conference presentation on instapoetry, followed by her EBR essay: Berens, Kathi Inman. "E-Lit's #1 Hit: Is Instagram Poetry E-literature?", *Electronic Book Review*, April 7, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.7273/qs76-nj80>. The logics of "generations" has been differently reconfigured by Astrid Ensslin et al as "waves" – with an apparent nod to the well-known narrative of the history of the feminist movement, see Ensslin, Astrid and Carla Rice, Sarah Riley, Christine Wilks, Megan Perram, Hannah Fowlie, Lauren Munro, and K. Alysse Bailey. ""These Waves ...": Writing New Bodies for Applied E-literature Studies", *Electronic Book Review*, April 5, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.7273/c26p-0t17>.

expressive potential of electronic and digital media" (on top of creative pedagogies and social media activity of Leonardo Flores, Jeremy Hights and Talan Memmott among others to be watched in real time by those who follow their Facebook accounts) but has also inspired insightful propositions to reconfigure already established e-literature's genealogies, as recent Alex Saum-Pascual's essay on YouTube poems demonstrates.

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A. Saum-Pascual, Is Third Generation Literature Postweb? And Why Should We Care?, *Electronic Book Review*, May 3, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.7273/60pg-1574>.

Instapoetry does not get mentioned in *Electronic Literature*. There are some

obvious reasons for this. Firstly, it does not fit into the definition, if presumed that "electronic literature is fundamentally experimental literature" which "could not exist in the absence of this computational context." For with

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Ibidem, p. 5.

instapoetry, the context is not so much code-centered and

thus "computational", as it is rather related to the reality of the internet of platforms. Secondly, the phenomenon this category is referring to is so fresh that even its very tag name has still been in the making until relatively recently, as documented by Jeneen

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J. Naji, The Posthuman Poetics of Instagram Poetry, Proceedings of EVA Copenhagen 2018, British Computer Society, <http://dx.doi.org/10.14236/ewic/EVAC18.1>

Naji's 2018 conference paper. The insightful questions already have been raised by Kathi Inman Berens and Alex Saum-Pascual concerning some aspects of this type of third-gen e-literature and its postweb quality. One cannot also escape the thought that the phenomenon of instapoetry

deserves a sound feminist critique that would revisit gender-based contempt for the popular, sentimental, and repetitive. However, the widely popular postweb poetic forms and the discussion they provoke can also be seen from entirely different angle, as an

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J. Mittell, *Genre, and Television. From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture*, Routledge, New York and London 2004, p. 10. As surprising as it sounds, Mittell's proposition of cultural approach to genre theory might be relevant for the nascent digital genre theory to which Rettberg's book is a

attempt at "regenrification" stemming from a significant cultural shift, as genres – according to Jason Mittell – are established in dynamic oscillation between texts, audience, and industrial practices. In fact, Rettberg succeeds in "locating genres within the complex interrelations between texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts." And yet

significant contribution. Although not new and proposed mostly in the context of TV studies, it seems to offer a quite interesting point of departure for (and contribution to) a genre theory interested in seeing genres as discursive formations (i.e., functions of reading and performing meaningful practices by the various audiences). Not least because Mittell's proposition was aimed at the domain of cultural production stripped of "pretensions toward high aesthetic values" (J. Mittell, *Genre...* p.10 (although, as we all know, contemporary TV series not only are not barred from attaining such standards but often are seen as the key contemporary cultural texts) and interested in productive maneuvering between "formalist" and "interpretive" approaches to genre theory, inherited from literary and film studies. Rettberg's proposition does not conform to either fallacy. Neither is a failure on their own grounds; both can be seen as failing to acknowledge wider social and cultural contexts of production – distribution – reception circuits specific for the respective media environments. The author of *Electronic Literature* is as far from any pure textualist assumptions as an advanced practitioner, and researcher of digital creativity can be. Yet, the space for the audience's interventions, interpretations, and reading is still to be filled in a more detailed way.

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J. Mittell, *Genre...* p. 10.

both the third-gen's e-lit and the discussion that is

surrounding it seem to happen somewhat outside the scope of *Electronic Literature*, which only demonstrates to what extent the healthy ecosystem is capable of outgrowing the initial design or how dynamic e-literary practices develop these days.

Interestingly, there is much more at stake than just another debate on the cultural distinctions. Considering the current cultural moment of postdigital condition of which postweb is one of the symptoms, it is particularly tempting to see such "regenrification" of poetry (and other cultural forms) in light of the paradoxical processes analyzed by Davin Heckman and Jameson O'Sullivan as a distinction that is "expressed through a multitude of microscopic ventriloquisms that ride along sculpted paths of attention." Apparently this remark

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D. Heckman, J. O'Sullivan, "your visit will leave a permanent mark": Poetics in the Post-Digital Economy, In: : The Bloomsbury Handbook... p.99.

constitutes another idea from my research notebook that needs to be put to rest for now. It might respond to Joseph

Tabbi's conclusion that "the post-digital is no place for avant-gardes" with an observation that a truly revolutionary

gesture these (post-digital) days may be located in the muddy domain of cultural mimicry and de-identification (in the world, where ANY identity can be easily co-opted and monetized). This cultural moment seems to demonstrate reactions to the digital disruption caused by ubiquity of digital media on a wider scale, as hinted at by two significant and somehow interrelated "posts" of our post-apocalyptic age: postdigital condition and postinternet art. The peculiar conditions of living "after" digital resonate in all terms "post" related to the ubiquity of networked computing technology in the first decades of the 21st century. Marisa Olson, who coined the phrase of postinternet art, clarified on more than one occasion that she meant her artistic practice being placed quite literally "after the internet" – after long hours spent clicking, surfing and browsing. Nevertheless, almost a decade after the initial naming gesture, she also emphasized another meaning of the preposition, imbued with a slightly Derridean hauntological sensibility, condensed in a noun of choice being "vapors":

"Much as I referred earlier to the late-90s dichotomy between what new media artists were doing with technology and how the rest of world related to it, the reason that the term "postinternet" now refers to a status quo is that, certainly for those who are reading and exchanging the word (those whom I presume to be literate Westerners with access to the World Wide Web), the internet is a given. We know what it is, what it looks like, what its aesthetics and many of its inside jokes are about, and we're not surprised when we see its vapors offline: Yelp stickers on restaurant doors, emoji magnets, Tumblr aesthetic bedsheets, etc.." The impression that "the internet is given" has indeed become popular, widespread, and obvious as

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M. Olson, On the Internet, No One Knows You're a Doghouse, e-flux Architecture, July 31, 2017 <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/post-internet-cities/140712/on-the-internet-no-one-knows-you-re-a-doghouse/> [Access: 7 Feb. 2020].

most of the "third-gen e-lit" exemplifies. It is not a coincidence that the notion of postinternet art raised similar debate in the circles of curators, art critics, and spectators.

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As documented in the edited volume *You Are Here – Art After the Internet* ed. O. Kholeif, Cornerhous Publications, London 2014, where Jennifer Chan proposes to see postinternet art as "the bastard child of net.art and contemporary art" and proclaims that "regressive is progressive". (J. Chan, *Notes on Post-Internet*, p. 110.). If "the post-internet artists can be considered alchemists" who "take stock of the rubbish heap of net history", then the space opens up for employing the category of "anthropophagy" rather than the one of remix, as cleverly demonstrated by R. Simanowski and J. Naji in their respective texts, with Naji aptly using this concept to interpret instapoetry in the already mentioned conference paper. See R. Simanowski, "Digital Anthropophagy. Refashioning Words as Image, Sound and Action, *Leonardo* vo. 43 no. 2, 2010, J. Naji, *The Posthuman...* .

At least some discursive threads from that discussion sound familiar to what we are experiencing on the ground of e-literature (for example, a misunderstanding arose around postinternet art supposedly not being media-conscious enough and at times even opportunistic on the surface). Tracing these affinities is another bulleted point from my research ideas notebook (and this one, too, is going to wait for another occasion). Scott Rettberg's

Electronic Literature masterful synthesis of the vast field of creative practice set the stage for pursuing the line of investigations that would locate electronic literature in the broader formation of media art, yet without losing its specificity and relative autonomy. It might even require revisiting the familiar genealogies of both electronic literature and media art in search of mutual cross-pollinations. Both fields might have been much closer than previously thought, for instance the history of groundbreaking 1968 ICA exhibition, *Cybernetic Serendipity*, is grounded in conjunction of concrete poetry and computer aesthetics, according to its successful curator, Jasia Reichardt, two developments which "were distinct from anything that had gone before", both of which "hovered on the borderlines of the art world without ever reaching its center."

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J. Reichardt, *In the Beginning...*, In: *White Heat Cold Logic. British Computer Art 1960-1980*, eds. P. Brown, Ch. Gere, N. Lambert, and C. Mason, MIT Press, Cambridge and London 2008, p. 72. In the same chapter, Reichardt writes: "Both computer art and concrete poetry belonged to art's outer periphery. They were treated as separate categories by art critics, art colleges, and galleries. To some extent they still are, largely because there is not sufficient historical background to suggest how we should think of them." (p. 72). She also remarks that the very idea of *Cybernetic Serendipity* was the direct consequence of meeting with Max Bense on the occasion of an exhibition of concrete poetry (*Between Poetry and Painting*) Reichardt organized in ICA in 1965.

This, in turn, may help us to slightly refresh the perspective on "third gen e-lit" as maybe peculiar but – considering the complexity of the cultural moment when platform capitalism takes its toll on our hearts and minds – nevertheless adequate "vapor" of e-literature, with all its potential of cultural critique that avoids being articulated as such on the surface (all too well aware of how the capitalist affective economies mastered the mechanisms of co-optation), and often opting instead for mimicry and masquerade rather than openly voicing the discord. Therefore, with the stage set and the trajectory outlined, we might grasp more fully what the "third generation" actually means, in line with the conviction that "Studying electronic literature is less about tackling a canon than it is about building a collective understanding of the creative potentialities of digital media." Gardening e-literature through the process which is not

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S. Rettberg, *Electronic..* p. 17.

about policing, monitoring and banishing organisms which might come to our plot motivated by their own interests and decisions, but inspires instead to open up the space, sit on a porch with a drink randomly and playfully generated out of imagined ingredients, invite newcomers and enjoy the work that unexpected allies want to do for us and the ecosystem - making it healthier, more resilient and more fun.

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In Praise of the (Post) Digital

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